YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Vayishlach**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**"And a Man Wrestled with Him": The Struggle Between Yaakov and Esav**

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**Introduction: Yaakov's Preparations for His Meeting with Esav**

*Parashat Vayishlach* opens with Yaakov's preparations for his meeting with his brother Esav, which are carried out in a state of great trepidation: "And Yaakov was greatly afraid and was distressed" (*Bereishit* 32:8). Among these preparations, he divides his family into two camps in order to prevent the most tragic potential outcome.

Following the *midrash*, Rashi explains that Yaakov "prepared himself for three things: for a gift, for prayer, and for war" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 32:9, s.v. *ve-haya*)

Before we elaborate on his preparations for war, it should be noted that on the face of it, the different modes of action that Yaakov undertook express contradictory worldviews. Giving a gift and preparing for war are examples of human effort and are seemingly not in line with prayer,[[1]](#footnote-1) which signifies an avoidance of responsibility and leaving matters in the hands of God. Of course, the answer – which is obvious, but nevertheless important to mention – is that there is no contradiction: personal effort does not exempt a person from prayer; and neither does prayer exempt a person from personal effort. We must adopt a combination of the two.

It is very clear where the verses describe Yaakov's prayer, and a large number of verses are dedicated to describing the gift. However, it is not entirely clear what the preparations for war consisted of. After the description of Yaakov's prayer and the account of the present he sent to Esav, one might have expected a description of his preparations for war, but instead we are told about how Yaakov divided up his family into two camps for the purpose of survival – so that “if Esav will come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape" (*Bereishit* 32:9) – and immediately afterwards, we read about how they all bowed down to Esav upon meeting him. If the division of the camp into two was not a preparation for war, then what did that preparation consist of?

It turns out that the preparation for war can be found in the passage that we skipped – at the crossing of the Yabok stream.

**Crossing of the Yabok**

The Yabok stream flows from east to west, and spills into the Jordan river. In my estimation, Yaakov crossed the Yabok stream three times. The first crossing followed his covenant with Lavan at the end of *Parashat Vayetze*, when Lavan remained in Gil'ad, on the northern bank of the Yabok, and Yaakov moved with his family to the southern bank, so that the Yabok served as a boundary between Yaakov and Lavan.

Yaakov continued his journey on the southern bank of the Yabok, this time heading west. When he approached the land of Canaan and feared the imminent arrival of Esav, he moved his family to the northern bank of the Yabok, and then crossed it once again, remaining by himself on the southern bank.

Why did he return by himself to the southern bank? It stands to reason that this was his preparation for war. When he heard that Esav was coming toward him with four hundred men, he first took care to move the women and children to a safe place, and only then did he return to confront Esav, or at least Esav's angel, by himself.[[2]](#footnote-2) At this point, it is important to emphasize that Yaakov himself was very powerful. Remember that when he arrived in Charan, Yaakov is described as rolling the stone from the mouth of the well, and Rashi comments: "to show you how strong he was" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 29:10). Therefore, Yaakov judged himself capable of standing up to Esav in battle, even by himself.

What caused Yaakov to cross the Yabok with his family in the middle of the night? The description of the crossing begins with him waking up from sleep – "And he rose up that night" (*Bereishit* 32:23). We know of another place that also describes Yaakov waking up in the middle of the night – following the dream of the ladder, where it is stated: "And Yaakov awoke from his sleep, and he said: Surely the Lord is in this place, and I knew it not" (*Bereishit* 28:16). In light of the comparison between these two verses, it is reasonable to suggest that here too, Yaakov dreamed of a ladder (again), only this time he apparently did not see angels ascending and descending, but rather a single angel coming down in his direction. When he understood that the angel was coming closer to him, he woke up, moved his family to a safe place, and remained where he was in order to face the angel by himself.

If so, Yaakov was truly willing to give up his life for the war against Esav. If, God forbid, he had fallen in his struggle with Esav, the price would certainly have been very heavy – but thanks to the fact that his family remained north of the river, the people of Israel would have endured.

**What did Esav want?**

From an examination of the verses, it seems that Esav was indeed intent on waging war against Yaakov. There is no other reason for which he would have brought four hundred warriors with him. Furthermore, we see that Esav did not accept Yaakov’s gift, which indicates that he did not respond to Yaakov’s attempts at reconciliation. What, then, stopped him? Why did Esav not fight against Yaakov in the end?

It stands to reason that Yaakov’s rescue – thanks to Esav ultimately refraining from waging war – is connected to his struggle with the angel. When Esav saw that Yaakov stood before him ready for war, and ready even to give up his life for the war – and all this after a long night’s struggle in which this readiness was demonstrated – he backed down from his offensive intention and abandoned his war plans.

We have witnessed similar processes in recent generations. Our enemies sometimes attack us, and attribute this to the fact that, according to them, we are not truly ready to fight them. But when we are truly and strikingly ready for war, and not afraid to show it, they are suddenly ready to look for compromises and agreements.

**Esav and Yaakov**

The Rambam writes that Yaakov's entire struggle with the angel took place in a prophetic vision (*Guide for the Perplexed*, II, 42). The Ramban (*Bereishit* 18:1, s.v. *ve-khen amar*) raises an objection based on the fact that Yaakov limped afterwards; it would seem that an event taking place in a dream cannot cause physical lameness. On the other hand, it is clear that the struggle was not conducted against an ordinary person, and therefore the Ramban explains instead (ibid., s.v. *aval bimkom*) that we are dealing with an angel.

As Rashi explains, based on *Chazal,* that angel was "Esav's guardian angel" (Rashi, *Bereishit* 32:25). This would mean that the physical struggle during the night gave expression to a fundamental conflict between Yaakov and Esav. As in many wars which are not confined to physical plane alone, here too, the conflict was also – and perhaps primarily – a spiritual one.

What is the root of the ideological, religious difference between Yaakov and Esav? It seems to be related to their respective perceptions of their father Yitzchak, and thus also how to continue in his path. Esav, who was "a cunning hunter, a man of the field" (*Bereishit* 25:27), saw mainly that side of Yitzchak – Yitzchak was indeed a very successful man, and after he confronted the Pelishtim, they went to him and asked him to enter into a covenant with them. This is the Yitzchak that Esav saw and wanted to be like. In contrast, Yaakov, who was "a quiet man, dwelling in tents" (*Bereishit* 25:27), saw a different Yitzchak, and thus he set different goals for himself. He saw Yitzchak lying on the altar with a knife at his throat, waiting for the revelation of the *Shekhina.*

**Conclusion**

Yaakov came out on top in the struggle against his brother: the angel blessed him, and Esav refrained from harming him and his family. In the end, even Esav recognized Yaakov as Yitzchak's heir, and he turned with his family to Mount Seir, whereas Yaakov continued on his way and settled in the land of Canaan, as did his fathers before him. Later, Yaakov merited that all of his sons would continue in the building of the people of Israel.

In the course of the struggle – physical and spiritual – between Esav and Yaakov, two principles can be identified that distinguish Yaakov's behavior. The first is his dedication, his self-sacrifice. Yaakov deterred Esav by virtue of the dedication that he demonstrated in his struggle with the angel. Dedication is needed in the struggle over the land – not only against Esav, but also in our generation. The second is the unity of his family. Yaakov made sure that all of his sons would stay with him and would go on, *together*, to build the people of Israel. This stands in contrast to Esav, whose sons, with all their chiefs, went their separate ways and established fragments of nations. Thus, in contrast to Esav's failure, Yaakov merited that the people of Israel, the people of God, would rise from his children.

We, the descendants of Yaakov, must learn from his actions, both internally and externally. Internally, the mutual commitment of the people of Israel is amazing, thank God, but we have to remember that it does not come about on its own, and it must be cared for and nurtured. This is also true externally – we must be prepared to stand up to our enemies with self-sacrifice, just as some of them stand up to us and declare that they are ready to die in the struggle. In order to succeed in holding on to this land against our enemies, self-sacrifice is required.

Finally, in the struggle between Yaakov and Esav in our *parasha*, we see the seriousness of conflicts between brothers; two people grow up in the same house, with the same father and mother – and even they reach a state of near-war. In the following *parashot*, which recount the stories of Yaakov's sons, we will see how the conflict between people born to different mothers can be even more serious, especially in the sale of Yosef.

These *parashot* present us with an important lesson: We must remember that "we are all the sons of one man" (*Bereishit* 42:11); we are all one people, and we have a common national foundation that predates all the subdivisions and tribes that came afterwards. From time to time, we see such mutual commitment: the concern of the entire Jewish people for the couple who were detained this week in Turkey, and who were rescued from there, proves this well. But we must not rest on our laurels. We must magnify and increase unity among our people, and strengthen the sense of brotherhood between each person and his fellow.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Vayishlach* 5782.]

Edited by Sarah Rudolph

1. This seems to be the basis of *Chazal's derasha* that Yaakov instituted specifically the evening prayer (*Berakhot 26b).* In addition to the fact that he opens his prayer with an appeal to God as "the God of his fathers" – as we do with the *Avot* blessing at the beginning of the *Amida* prayer, he also prays to God that He should save him from various troubles, as we do in the *Hashkiveinu* blessing in the evening service. Furthermore, he goes to sleep after reciting his prayer, which accords with the evening service. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is also what his descendants did many years later in Gush Etzion in 1948. In the struggle against the British and the Arabs, they first removed the children to a safe venue, and only afterwards did the fighters remain behind, ready to sacrifice their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)